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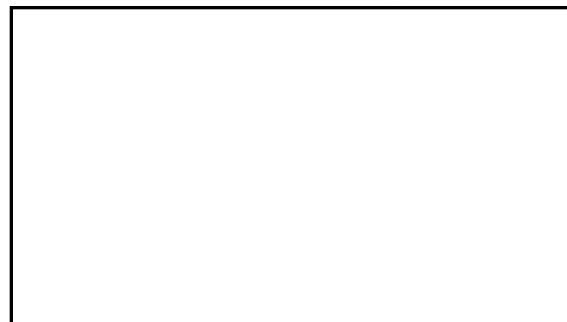
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DIRECTORATE OF  
INTELLIGENCE



# Intelligence Memorandum

*Hanoi and US Prisoners of War*

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28 June 1971  
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CENTRAL INTELLIGENCE AGENCY  
Directorate of Intelligence  
28 June 1971

INTELLIGENCE MEMORANDUM

Hanoi and US Prisoners of War

Summary

Hanoi insists that the question of American prisoners of war is a postwar issue. Last fall, however, the Vietnamese Communists began suggesting that American prisoners might be released in response to US disengagement even if the war itself were not over. This memorandum concludes that such implications are window dressing and that Hanoi's long-standing demands for a settlement of the war are subsumed in its terms for releasing American prisoners. In short, the Communists are not likely to release all American prisoners as long as the US provides Saigon the support necessary to continue the war.

Note: This memorandum was prepared by the Office of Current Intelligence and coordinated within CIA.

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1. To understand Hanoi's approach to the question of prisoners of war, one should keep in mind the broader military and political issues the Communists insist must be resolved to their satisfaction before the prisoners can be released. Hanoi still insists on termination of American involvement in Vietnam, an end to anti-Communist government in South Vietnam, and the establishment of a new regime affording the Communists a solid position from which to work toward full control of the South and reunification of all Vietnam.

2. In the absence of allied political concessions in negotiations--and because completely ending American involvement in the near future would probably bring an end to anti-Communist government in South Vietnam in short order--Hanoi has concentrated its fire on the US role in the war. Hanoi's basic demands on the US are twofold: 1) withdrawal of all US forces; and 2) cessation of US protection and support of the present government in Saigon.

3. On the specific issue of prisoners of war, the Communists have adopted a short-hand version of this twofold demand. Their standard formulation, which appeared for the first time in the Viet Cong's eight points last fall, says that if the US sets a date acceptable to Hanoi for complete American withdrawal, the two sides will immediately begin discussing the release of prisoners. There are two points of deliberate ambiguity in this formula: first, what the Communists mean by "complete American withdrawal"; second, what they mean by "discussions"--how long would they last before prisoners would actually be released and what other topics would be included in the discussions.

4. On the second point, the Communists apparently have gone to some lengths in private conversations to convey the impression that the "discussions" would be successfully concluded in short order and the prisoners released fairly promptly. None of our other evidence, however, suggests that this scenario would, in fact, occur. Indeed, most of the evidence available suggests that the Communists are trying to obtain a date for withdrawal in the same way they

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pushed for a bombing halt in 1968: by insisting the US move unilaterally, and by implying that this would produce favorable results. Meanwhile, they are as vague as possible about the form of Communist reciprocity. It is the first point of ambiguity--what is meant by "complete American withdrawal"--that is the key, however. It has always been clear that the Communists would drive a hard bargain, although their demands have not always been specific. Obviously, if the Communists are asking for a US withdrawal that is both rapid and comprehensive, they also are implicitly demanding an end at least to Washington's direct military support of the Saigon government. In effect, therefore, their two basic demands for a settlement of the war are subsumed in their single demand on the prisoners.

5. Xuan Thuy, Hanoi's chief negotiator in Paris, elaborated rather frankly on these matters in a recent interview with Chalmers Roberts of the Washington Post. Mr. Roberts' account of the interview appeared in the Post on 9 June [redacted]

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[redacted] Mr. Roberts bore down hard on Thuy, forcing him either to answer pointed questions or to display his unwillingness to reply. [redacted] indicate that they took a very hard line and held out no hope of an easy way for the US to obtain the prisoners' release.

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6. Xuan Thuy argued that the military and political issues of the war cannot be separated and that the war must be settled before the prisoner issue can be resolved. As he did in an interview with Anthony Lewis of the New York Times in late May, Thuy made a point of underscoring alleged Communist "flexibility" on the prisoner question. But his words also revealed that this "flexibility" consists solely of the oft-expressed Communist willingness to discuss the release of prisoners after a date for the withdrawal of all US forces has been set.

7. Xuan Thuy made very clear to Chalmers Roberts that simply setting a date for the withdrawal of US forces would not bring about the release of American

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prisoners. He called for "total withdrawal" and indicated that Hanoi defines this as the pulling out of all American military personnel--including advisers, instructors, and other noncombatants--along with all South Korean, Thai, Australian, and New Zealand forces. In addition, he specified that all American military operations against the Communists, including air operations from Thailand and from carriers at sea, would have to end.

8. Thuy strongly implied at several points in the interview that to satisfy Hanoi, the US would have to halt all military and economic aid to the South Vietnamese Government. He waffled when Mr. Roberts tried to pin him down on this matter, but the main thrust of his argument was clear: the fundamental issue is US support for the present government in Saigon; as long as this support continues the war will continue, and as long as the war continues US prisoners will not be released.

9. In an attempt to follow up Mr. Roberts' interview, a US correspondent asked the North Vietnamese press spokesman in Paris on 17 June if stopping economic and military aid to Saigon was a condition for releasing prisoners. The spokesman said the Communists insist that the US cease all political, economic, and military support of the present government; he reiterated that the question of prisoner release could be discussed only after a "reasonable" date for troop withdrawal is set.

10. In the months ahead Hanoi is likely to play variations on the prisoner/withdrawal theme in the hope of encouraging critics of US policy who argue that setting a troop withdrawal date is the best way not only to end American involvement but also to secure the release of American prisoners. One possibility is a Communist initiative pegged to the Mansfield amendment passed by the US Senate this week. Hanoi might calculate that a more specific commitment now to release US prisoners--without, however, altering basic Communist demands--would place President Nixon in an awkward position. They might also hope it would stimulate greater public and Congressional support for a withdrawal deadline and that it

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would also have an unsettling effect on the South Vietnamese political scene and on morale and confidence in Saigon.

11. But a really basic change in the present two-part Communist demand for release of prisoners is not likely. Certainly Hanoi will continue to insist that the US must be committed to terminating its military rôle in Vietnam before a prisoner release can even be discussed. There is a bit more room for Hanoi to maneuver with regard to US economic and military aid to the Saigon government--out not much. After failing to extract allied concessions that might lead to a broad settlement in Vietnam, the Communists have stopped pressing their earlier demand that the US agree formally to a restructured political regime in South Vietnam. But they still insist on US actions that, if carried out before a settlement of the war, would pull the rug from under the present Saigon government. Therefore, even if the US should terminate its direct combat role in Vietnam, we believe that Hanoi would stall on releasing American prisoners until the US stopped providing Saigon the minimum aid necessary to continue the war.

12. The light that the Roberts' interview sheds on Hanoi's terms for releasing prisoners also illuminates some other fundamentals in the Communist view of the present war situation. Since 1969, when the US adopted President Nixon's Vietnamization policy, the Communists have argued that the US is bent on continuing, not ending, the war. They acknowledge that President Nixon is trying to reduce American participation in the war, but they maintain that American involvement can end in only two ways: 1) through negotiations leading to a reordering of political power in South Vietnam; or 2) through the withdrawal of US forces and the curtailing of US support of the present government to the point where Saigon is not able to contain the Communists.

13. Hanoi's contention that Vietnamization does not provide a third way to end American involvement is not very convincing as long as the US withdraws troops steadily and the South Vietnamese are

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able to pick up the additional security burden, as they generally have over the past two years. This is one reason we expect North Vietnam to put more manpower and energy into a more intensive war effort in the year ahead. By trying to convince the US that Vietnamization will not work over the longer run, Hanoi probably hopes to put some teeth into its argument that Washington must either negotiate a settlement satisfactory to Hanoi or simply abandon Saigon regardless of the consequences.

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